



MURDER *off key*

By Stanley Sprague

CARLSON stepped out on the balcony, but the infernal singing from the next apartment was louder there. The woman's voice beat against his eardrums with off-key frenzy. He shuddered.

Her voice reminded him of Violet, who sang as badly, if not worse.

He took one of the chairs in the cool darkness, lighted his pipe, and tried to ignore the so-called scales the woman was singing. It seemed

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by

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79



to him that the noise—you couldn't call it music—had an abnormal quality; it was as though something had snapped and she couldn't stop those horrible sounds that rasped from her throat.

They went on and on, over and over again, rising and falling, scraping the night into quivering shreds.

"She's pretty terrible, isn't she?"

The voice came from his left, on the next balcony, away from the singer, and it had a quality of youth. He formed a picture from this new voice: brunette, a provocative mouth, pretty legs. He looked, but could see nobody in the deep shadows.

"She's awful," Carlson said. "Does she do it often, or only when the moon is full?"

"Oh, she goes on like that almost every evening. You must be new around here."

"I just got here this afternoon."

"Are you visiting Mr. Morley?"

"In a way," Carlson said. "He went out of town, and I'm staying in his apartment."

"I didn't mean to sound prying," the voice said, "but he told me—he was going on a vacation, and I wondered if he'd left."

Carlson started to amplify his position, with the idea of promoting a closer relationship between himself and the owner of this low, full voice, but the singer swelled suddenly into a limping fortissimo, and Carlson shuddered.

"Her family must be all deaf mutes," he commented.

"She lives alone."

"That's easy to understand. Why

doesn't the manager do something about it?"

"Oh, she's wrapped him around her finger along with—others. But you'd think somebody would do something about her."

Carlson raised his voice above the growing agonized singing. "They could always try—" The singer suddenly broke off at this moment, and Carlson's final words were loud in the night. "—strangling her!"

A window slammed from the singer's apartment.

The voice on his left chuckled. "She heard you."

"I imagine they heard that all the way up to the Bronx. Oh, well, maybe we'll have a little quiet."

"And I'll spend it in sleeping. Goodnight."

As she opened her French windows and light fanned out, Carlson could see that she was blonde and young. He called goodnight, and went in to bed. Nothing further was heard from the singer.

He met her on the next afternoon. She was coming out of her apartment as he entered Morley's. He was shocked. He stood with his mouth hanging open as he looked at her: the same flame red hair, the body full of promise; the half-mocking smile.

"So it was you," he said. "Well, Violet."

"Hello, Frederick. Won't you come in?"

"Why?" he asked bluntly. "We've nothing in common any more."

Her smile broadened. "We have a name in common, and a mutual in-

terest in your economic welfare. Come on in, I'll give you a drink. There's no point in being enemies, even if we were married once."

"I guess you're right," he said, and followed her inside. He felt reluctant, but there was another feeling which a man never quite loses toward a woman he was once married to.

At one time he was either in love with her or his emotion was a reasonable facsimile. She was still beautiful, and Carlson was never unmoved by feminine beauty. He sat down in a deep chair, a duplicate of the chair in Morley's place, and watched her open a liquor cabinet.

"Bourbon?"

"Thanks."

A big blue cat came out of the bedroom, stretched, looked at Carlson with boredom, and jumped up on his lap. Carlson let his fingers run through the long, silky fur.

"He scratches," Violet said, "if you get too rough with him."

"He's a beautiful cat."

"He's my pillar in the storm," she said as she added soda water to the drinks. "He sleeps with me, on a pillow of his own."

"Isn't this something new for you, a cat?"

She brought him his drink, and sat on a low couch that matched her green suit and eyes. "He's company," she said, "and he doesn't mind my practising, which is more than I can say of some of the people around here."

Carlson repressed a shudder, and refused to be drawn into a discussion

of her voice. That had been a topic of too many bitter conversations between them.

He looked around the apartment, which a monthly check from his lawyers paid for, and saw evidence of Violet everywhere. She still cluttered the walls with bad art, she insisted on reading cheap magazines and leaving them lie wherever she finished with them, and her favorite color made the room look something like a bilious garden.

He dug his fingers into the cat's fur, a reflex motion brought on by his hatred of that shade of green, and the big Persian twisted and dabbed at him with an armed paw. Carlson jerked his hand away.

"Sorry, old boy."

The cat went back to sleep.

"What are you doing here?" Violet asked.

"Business trip. Morley offered to lend me this apartment while he's away. Nice of him, I thought."

"Oh, Walter's very nice," she said lazily. "His wife's rather a frump."

"I don't know her," Carlson said.

"Where is she?"

"Visiting mama," Violet said. "Every time something happens, she rushes off like an outraged bride."

"Did something happen?"

Violet chuckled. "She thought I was trying to steal her husband."

"Were you?"

"Frederick, please. What would I do with Walter?"

Carlson dumped the cat off on the floor. It made a high back, yawned at him, and went into the bedroom.

"I've got to go, Violet. Sorry to

hear about your differences with the Morleys. I had no idea I was getting in the middle of something. Matter of fact, I had no idea you'd be in a thousand miles of here."

"Or you wouldn't have come?"

"I don't say that." He spread his hands. "As you said, there's no point in being enemies."

She got off the couch and came close to him. "That's right. Let's be friends, Frederick. We never were, you know. We were lovers—and haters—but never friends. Come to dinner tonight, and let's try being friendly."

"Well, I—don't know," he said hesitantly. "I'd sort of planned—"

As she stood there, with her subtle perfume in his nostrils, he felt a faint resurgence of that attraction toward her which once had been so strong. She was damned beautiful, all right.

"I'll come," he said. "Sevenish?"

"Fine. See you later."

Back in Morley's apartment, he went through the motions of bathing, shaving, and dressing while his mind pried in and around a question.

Why hadn't Morley told him Violet was his next door neighbor?

It couldn't have been just absent-mindedness. Morley knew they'd been divorced, and it would have been the natural thing to say something like Oh, by the way, guess who's in the next apartment.

That certainly seemed the natural thing. Not telling was unnatural, then. Why?

Perhaps they'd been having an affair. But so what? It was of no

interest to Carlson. After the divorce, he'd turned all details over to his lawyers. They billed him each month for the agreed alimony. They didn't bother him with notification of her changes of address or other activities.

But Violet didn't act as if she'd been playing around with Morley. She'd have had a small triumph in her voice, a smugness that he hadn't detected.

Assuming there was nothing between his friend and his ex-wife, what purpose could Morley have had for not mentioning Violet's residence here? Morley never did anything unintentionally; he'd made his reputation as New York's number-one mouthpiece by keeping factors sorted at all times in his amazing mind.

It could be—Carlson examined this new thought carefully—friendship. Morley might have assumed that Carlson wouldn't have accepted the loan of the apartment if he knew he'd be living practically in Violet's lap. But that wasn't like Morley, either. Not that he wasn't a good friend, and generous. But he would have foreseen the possibility of Violet and Carlson bumping into each other, and would have known that Carlson would go into a question period with himself, as he was doing now.

Carlson scowled into the mirror as he knotted his black tie.

THE DINNER was something of a travesty. The food was all right; Violet was a good cook. But they simply had nothing to talk about.

They'd gone through everything, over and over, before. They'd discussed—both calmly and at the top of their lungs—what was wrong with him from her viewpoint, and what was wrong with her from his.

They had a Martini, which Violet made very dry, before dinner. She served a good Chablis with the veal roast, and topped off dessert and coffee with 20-year-old brandy.

Their conversation was:

"And how've you been?"

"You're looking well."

"It was such a surprise, running into you like this."

And so on.

They went into the living room and sat down. They looked at each other for a while, and Carlson wondered why she had gone to so much trouble to make herself provocative for him. She was dressed in a long dark evening dress; long, that is, on the bottom, but short on the top. It was cut so that the most casual glance would see that she had a magnificent figure. Her red hair fell down in a gleaming cloud around her creamy shoulders.

They had another brandy.

The big blue Persian came and jumped into Carlson's lap, and Carlson felt a sense of well-being that had come to him rarely in the past few years. Why couldn't it have been like this, and meant something? Why should they have needed a divorce, for the sake of their sanity?

He had another brandy.

"Well," he said affably, "this is the first time I've seen you in two years, outside a courtroom."

She gave him a sad, sweet smile. "Rather like old times."

"The hell it is," Carlson said. "Let's don't get nostalgic. You know damned well the old times were never like this. They were noisy."

"Yes," she said. "You always did raise your voice, Frederick."

"The noise I remember most clearly, and painfully," he said quietly, "is that screeching you called singing."

She froze. She didn't say anything for a long time, and he occupied the interim of silence by pouring himself another drink.

"Frederick," she said finally, "you shouldn't have said that. You know my singing is my life. I am going to be a great opera star. My teacher says so."

"For my money," Carlson said.

"He'd teach me for nothing," she flared. "I don't want your filthy money!"

"Good!" He grinned crookedly. "Notify my lawyers, will you?"

"He says I have the greatest coloratura quality he has heard in years."

"I heard it," Carlson said dryly. "It still sounds like a saw that's hit a nail."

"You can't talk to me that way!" She glared at him, and her eyes glistened.

"Tears yet," Carlson said. "You could always turn 'em on and off. One of your greatest assets. 'S why I married you, I guess. Sorry for you."

"Please, Frederick," she whispered. "Don't talk to me like that."

"Why not? Oh, of course, I know why not. You never could face reality. I keep forgetting. You live in a little dream world created by your ego. Fine thing, your ego. Colossal." He tossed off his drink.

She got up, and he noticed every line of her, not without a stir of emotion. She was beautiful, and the tears were meringue. She walked across the room and back, hands clenched at her side.

"Why should we quarrel?" she burst out. "I'd hoped this could be a quiet and pleasant evening. For once."

"I'm perfec'ly willing," he said. "I'm not mad at anybody." He stroked the big Persian.

"Then why must you make those cutting remarks, Frederick? I do the best I can. Surely you can grant me that."

"Sure, sure," he said agreeably. "I'll grant you anything."

"And stop treating me like a child!"

"Stop acting like one, then."

She strode over to him, stood with clawed hands while he grinned up at her.

"Oh, I could——" she said.

"What, baby?" he jeered.

"Strangle me? Wait'll I have another li'l drink. Don't like to die without a drink. Have one?"

She went back to her chair and slumped into it. Carlson had his drink. He sat idly stroking the cat for a few seconds, then got to his feet.

"Thank you for the dinner," he said. "Mus' be going——"

He pitched forward on his face.

HE CAME to with a mouthful of cobwebs. Somebody had hung a bell clapper inside his head which swung between his thalamus and the backs of his eyeballs.

Before opening his eyes, he reviewed what might have happened to him. That he got drunk was for sure. What then?

He opened his eyes, and immediately clenched them against sunlight that poured cheerfully through a window. He turned over and buried his head in one arm.

If only he had a glass of beer, or ice cold milk. He decided to chance the consequences of getting up and finding the icebox with closed eyes. He threw off the cover—a blanket which felt unfamiliar—and swung his feet, fully shod, he noted, on to the floor. He stood up and tried to ignore the bell clapper. With his eyes still squeezed tight he felt his way into the kitchen and fumbled the icebox open.

He opened his eyes, and stared at the unfamiliar array of foodstuffs. A bottle of wine, a bottle of—thank God!—milk, leftovers, a bar of candy, a dab of butter. This wasn't his icebox. He looked around. It wasn't his kitchen.

He shrugged. He took the milk, had two large glasses, and felt better. He looked down at himself. He was fully dressed, except for coat and tie. He wandered back into the living room.

It was Violet's living room.

His coat and tie were hung over

the back of a chair. He put them on, struggling with the tie. He tiptoed towards the door.

As he looked at the door, a vague memory of trouble during the night stopped him. He stared at the knob, trying to recall what had happened. The events, if any, refused to take form in his mind, but the troubled feeling remained. He glanced in indecision at the closed bedroom door, and the muddy memory of the night led him to it. No harm in looking, to see that everything was all right.

The first thing he saw was the cat. It lay against the far wall, and was obviously dead. He opened the door wider, and there was Violet. Her hands lay clenched at her sides, on top of the cover, and her head was twisted at an unnatural angle. He went inside, approached the bed, and stared with dull eyes at the blue bruises on her throat.

He touched her face. It was cold and gray, the face of a woman who had been dead for hours.

He looked at the cat. Its ribs had been kicked in. Its lips were skinned back over its teeth, and its claws were unsheathed.

Carlson looked at his hands. He could see nothing unusual about them, except that his fingernails weren't as immaculate as he liked. That was natural. One's fingernails become soiled during the night, need to be tended each morning. The muscles of his arms seemed all right, too. The muscles used for squeezing were not painful.

He turned and left the apartment. As he closed Violet's door behind

him, the door of the apartment beyond his opened to emit the young lady of the balcony. She saw him, raised her eyebrows, said nothing, and went along the corridor towards the elevator.

He knew then that he should call the police. But he needed to think about this.

He went to Morley's icebox, where he had put away two quarts of beer, and opened one. He took it and a glass into the living room and fell into the big chair. What now?

Somebody would be sure to ask some questions. That girl next door had seen him coming from Violet's apartment. And he must have left fingerprints all over the place. It was said that the police took fingerprints.

But how would they know if he just took off? Sure, they could match the fingerprints there with what he had left here, but would they mean anything? Yes, they would. Not only could the girl next door give a description, but Morley could name him. No use to run.

What, then?

Sit still? Oh, no. Go about your regular business, and hope that no finger points to you. Shower, shave, finish the beer, and go to see all those people you came to see. Go about your daily routine as if you'd never seen Violet. Who can tell, they might skip you.

He had a hunch this wouldn't happen, and his hunch was proved right when he came home that evening. He opened the door, and a man was waiting for him...

This man was heavy, short, and blond. He sat in the big chair smoking a cigar, and smiled at Carlson.

"You're Frederick Carlson?" he asked in the softest voice imaginable.

Carlson stared at him. "Yes, but—just what the hell are you doing here?"

"Waiting for you," the soft voice purred.

"All right," Carlson snapped. "I'm here. Now scram." He hung his coat and hat in the closet, knowing that his visitor wouldn't move.

Nor did he. He was still smiling.

"Well?" Carlson said.

"Exactly," the big blonde man said. "Well?"

"I don't get you."

"Ah?"

The single syllable carried amusement, something of condescension, something of contempt.

Carlson came fully into the room, stood over his visitor, arms akimbo, and glared. "Who are you?"

The visitor produced identification. It proclaimed him to be Nathaniel Worts, Detective Lieutenant, Homicide, New York City.

"And so?" Carlson said.

"Sit down," Worts said softly. "We have several topics to discuss."

Carlson sat down.

He had never heard a voice with this particular quality, and he had become sensitive to voices during his marriage to Violet. The voice of Lt. Worts was like a whisper in an empty room at midnight, when there were no other sounds to override it. Yet it wasn't midnight; it was barely 4:30—but the voice carried over

the far sounds of traffic below.

"I think you knew the lady next door?" Worts said. "Mrs. Violet Carlson. Were married to her, in fact?"

"I—uh, know her," Carlson said. "But so—?"

"You know, of course, she's dead." Carlson shrugged. "If you say so. I didn't know before."

The short blond man's eyes sharpened. "It doesn't seem to affect you a great deal."

Carlson's shrug increased. "Why should it? We were divorced two years ago."

Worts stated flatly.

"You were in there last night,"

"For dinner, yes."

"You were seen coming out as seven thirty this morning."

So he'd talked so the girl next door. Carlson cast back in his memory for the scene. He'd been outside the door when she saw him. It was not necessarily true, from her viewpoint, that he had been inside a moment before. He made up his mind.

"Out?" he said. "I knocked on her door, to take her riding. She didn't answer, I didn't bother. I wasn't in her apartment later than ten o'clock last night."

"You're playing this awfully calm, Carlson."

"Why shouldn't I?" Carlson asked. "I had nothing to do with it. Have a drink? I want one."

"No, thanks." The voice was barely above a whisper, but perfectly audible.

Carlson got himself a drink of

bourbon, and sat down on the divan. He and Soft Voice looked at each other. The latter stood up presently. "Be seeing you, Carlson," he said, and went away.

As soon as the detective had gone, Carlson tossed off his drink. Then he sat for a long time staring at the wall, his lips curled into a sneer. Had he actually killed her? The question had dogged him all day. Everywhere he went, he had heard: "And stop treating me like a child!"

He got up off the divan and went to the mirror. He looked into it, but saw no reflection. He saw Violet, in her dress, long at the bottom and short at the top, with her sad sweet smile. He saw the big blue Persian. He saw the drinks of brandy he'd poured.

The girl next door . . .

He whirled suddenly and went out of his apartment. He knocked on the door of the girl on the balcony. It opened presently, and she looked at him, her blue eyes wide with surprise, her full mouth curved in a half smile.

"Yes?" she said in an uninviting voice.

"May I come in?" Carlson asked. "It's important."

"Why not?" she said, and stepped out of the way.

He stood. She motioned him to the big deep chair that seemed a common appurtenance of all the apartments in this building, but he declined. She sat on the divan, her legs curled into the folds of her chenille robe.

"Yes?" she said.

"You know why I'm here," Carlson began. "That woman—my ex-wife, by the way—who sang so terribly has been killed, and a detective was here halfway accusing me of killing her. He based part of his argument on the statement that I was seen coming out of there this morning. I wondered if you'd told him that."

She smiled, and the soft blue lights of her eyes were dull compared to her smile. "I can see that you're no killer. But I did see you coming out of there."

"Not coming out," he corrected. "Just after knocking."

She considered this with a frown. "Could be," she admitted. "I shot my face off too soon. Sorry. I hope it didn't cause you too much trouble."

"Well, no," Carlson said. "Not yet anyway. If you'll just straighten it out with that cop—"

"Certainly, if I ever see him again. Drink?"

"May I? I need one."

She brought drinks. He looked at her. He sipped his drink.

"At any rate," he said, and stopped. He had started to say "At any rate, we won't have to hear her any more." He finished: "—we've met face to face."

She raised her glass. "To us."

He raised his glass. "What? No fireplace to fling the remains into?"

For the first time in two years, he laughed heartily and was joined in hearty laughter.

"Will you have dinner with me?" he asked.

"I won't say no."

The restaurant was one of those out-of-the-way places that is advertised by word of mouth and hardly ever worth the price. Carlson ordered the table d'hôte. After they had gone through the soup, entree, salad, and dessert, a soft and familiar voice addressed Carlson:

"I always come here for the apple pie. May I join you?"

It was the short, stout, blond man.

Carlson smiled wryly.

"What if I said no?"

Detective Worts smiled. "I should join you anyway. Good evening, Miss Saks."

The girl nodded her head.

Worts sat beside the girl, and grinned at Carlson. "Why did you come here, Mr. Carlson?"

"Am I under arrest?"

"Not yet," Worts said. "I'd like some answers, though."

"I can't see why you didn't ask these things earlier," Carlson grumbled. "I wrote Morley. I said I had to be in New York for a week or so. He telephoned me, and offered me his apartment. His wife was away, and he was going fishing on a vacation. Nothing mysterious about that, is there?"

"No," Worts admitted. "Your visit to your ex-wife may need some explaining—"

"Lieutenant," Miss Saks put in. "I want to correct a thing I said. I said I saw him—Mr. Carlson—coming out of, uh, *her* apartment. I didn't, really. I only saw him at her door."

Lieutenant Worts looked at Carl-

son for a few moments. The detective got up. "Be seeing you," he said. "Carlson, don't forget the alimony angle. That could be a motive. And, from what the neighbors say, she was a vixen."

When he had gone, the girl said: "Oh, she was, Mr. Carlson. I know I—but I guess you know better than I. You were married to her."

Carlson lifted one corner of his mouth, dropped the other. "I know. Believe me, I know."

Miss Saks said: "I'm sorry." She sounded as if she meant it.

Carlson said: "I'm sorry, too."

They sat in silence for a few minutes, occupied with their own thoughts, until the waiter brought the bill. Carlson, loath to bring the evening to such an uninspiring end, suggested brandy. Miss Saks turned her smile on again.

The truth of the matter, Carlson told himself, was that he didn't want to be alone, he didn't want to think. The fact that the girl next door was attractive was a pleasant factor of his gregarious tendency, but anyone would have done.

"Tell me," he began, "about yourself."

The lingered over their brandy while the clientele of the place made a complete turnover, learning the little unimportant facts about each other that are the preliminary to closer relationship. They didn't mention the murder.

They went to her apartment, where she invited him in for a nightcap. This became two, and three, and it was past midnight when the knock

came on her door.

Miss Saks frowned. "Who could that be? We weren't making any noise. Well, only one way to find out—"

Worts stood in the hall, hat in hand. "I want to talk to Mr. Carlson," he whispered.

A tall, thin man in glasses came in with him and opened up fingerprint apparatus.

"Any objection to taking your prints?" Worts asked.

"Why should there be?" Carlson replied.

But he knew the net was closing on him. They'd undoubtedly found his prints in the bedroom. If he'd been in Violet's apartment only under circumstances he'd claimed, an obvious question raised itself: Why should he have been in the bedroom?

Not clinching evidence, certainly, but another fact that needed explaining. How to explain it? As the laboratory man rolled his fingers on the ink pad and paper, he searched for a plausible explanation. He gave it up, finally, decided to say nothing.

What he needed was a good lawyer. That was for sure.

"Maybe you'd better not leave town," Worts suggested. He bowed slightly to Miss Saks. "Sorry to have disturbed you."

"I was just leaving, anyway," Carlson said. "Past my bedtime."

He went out with the detective, after shaking hands with Miss Saks. Her clasp was firm and warm, and she lighted her smile for him again. Worts watched him go in next door, and Carlson waited until he heard

the elevator door close.

He put on a topcoat, left the lights burning, and walked down to the basement garage. He had his car gassed and oiled, and drove out. He took the highway north toward Kingston, estimating that with luck he'd make it shortly after sunrise.

He drove carefully and not too fast, his eyes but not his mind on the road.

Had he killed Violet in a drunken enraged stupor? He didn't believe it, but he wasn't sure. It was possible that his subconscious had created a mental block so that he would be unable to remember. If he had killed her, that would happen. He wouldn't wish to think about it, so his subconscious would bury the fact in the deepest, darkest corridors of his mind.

He worried at his memory, savagely tried to force events of the night before out into the open. But he drew a complete blank. He remembered saying goodnight. After that, nothing.

When he reached Kingston, birds were telling the day how nice it was. He drove through and headed for the hills, where Morley had said he'd fish. A filling station and garage that was near a group of fishermen's cabins was open, and the sleepy attendant directed him to Morley's cabin.

Morley wasn't in it. Dishes on the table told of an early breakfast, and the absence of trout rod and tackle in the big closet sent Carlson through sweet-smelling woods to the clear stream that romped down to-

ward the sea. Carlson started upstream, nodding to several fishermen, and finally found Morley knee-deep in the middle of the stream whipping a quiet pool.

Morley's candid gray eyes widened when Carlson hailed him, and the big man sloshed over to the bank, reeling in his line. Morley's silver hair gleamed in the slanting sun, and his grin was wide and friendly.

"Couldn't take the city, eh, Fred?" he boomed. "Won't shake hands. Slipped and fell upstream." He displayed his muddy hands. "Bet you're hungry, and I've got a beauty."

He lifted the lid of his creel. A brook trout some eight inches long quivered on a bed of wet leaves, and the sun bounced a rainbow off its gleaming sides. Morley led the way toward his cabin, and Carlson trudged moodily at his side.

"Now," Morley said, when he had the fish popping in the pan, "What's the trouble?"

"Somebody killed Violet night before last. Maybe I did," Carlson said bluntly.

Morley's square, mobile face made an O of surprise and furrows of shock. He said nothing as he set dishes and utensils on the rough table. He took a great deal of care over straightening a red-handled fork, and turned to Carlson.

"You want me to defend you, just in case?"

Carlson paced the floor for a moment. "If you will."

"If? My God, man, of course. Give me the dope."

Carlson continued to pace the floor

as he recounted his meeting with his former wife, their dinner, his getting drunk.

"From there on," he said, "I can't remember. I woke up on the couch, found her in the bedroom, and screamed."

"I don't see anything to get worried about," Morley said as he began serving. "Come and get it. I'll have coffee with you. There's no real evidence against you, and no eyewitness. Even if the cat's alive, it can't testify."

Carlson told him about the fingerprints. "I know they're on the bedroom doorknob, and probably on the wall or something. I was hung way over. Hell, I might have touched anything."

Morley put coffee on the table and sat down. "Well," he said judiciously, "that's a point. But couldn't you have had a reason for going in there? Maybe you had an idea of going to bed. After all, you were married once."

Carlson shook his head. "I might have killed her, but I wouldn't have got in bed with her for a million dollars. Besides, we'd had a rather vicious fight, name calling and all that. I guess I was nastier than necessary, but hell, I was sore."

"From the time you said goodbye, you didn't hear or see anything?"

"No. But Gabriel's trumpet wouldn't have brought me out of it. If somebody did come in and kill her while I was passed out, I wouldn't have noticed." Carlson considered this thought. "If somebody came in—that'd mean he came in

while I was dead to the world on the couch and after she'd gone to bed, or else she let him in."

"Why *he*? Why not *she*?"

"Violet was a big girl. It would take real strength to strangle her."

"A point," Morley admitted, "but not very conclusive. Well, let's recapitulate. After a fight with her, you passed out. During the time you were unconscious, somebody killed her. You saw nothing, heard nothing, remember nothing." Morley thought. "It's a fairly bad spot, all right. Motive could be proved—the alimony angle. And—"

He broke off, looked vacantly into space for a few moments. His eyes focussed on Carlson again, and he spoke thoughtfully, earnestly, a little sadly.

"Fred, I just thought of something. My advice is to plead temporary insanity."

"And admit I killed her?" Carlson cried. "That's the stupidest—"

"We've done quite a bit of drinking together in our day," Morley broke in. "I've seen you get drunk before. You've got a hair-trigger temper when you're stewed. Remember that Swede you beat up that night in Chicago? You didn't remember a thing about it—until I told you the next day. You draw blanks when—"

"I know," Carlson interrupted, "but, hell, man, violence will usually get through alcohol to your memory, no matter how drunk you are. I always wondered about that Swede. I couldn't remember anything you told me about it. I still can't. I

claim that if I'd killed Violet, I'd have *some* recollection of something."

"You'd think so," Morley said. "But as a lawyer, after considering the evidence, I advise the temporary insanity plea."

"I don't see it," Carlson said stubbornly.

"Look, Fred. I'm your friend, as well as your attorney. If you insist on fighting what looks like a certain indictment, you can arouse the animosity of everybody. But if you plead as I suggest, the jury and the judge can't help being sympathetic, and we may be able to get you off scot free, or at least with a small sentence."

Morley's voice was warm and full of concern, and Carlson felt a stirring of gratitude, along with another emotion which was growing every second.

This was a meditative suspicion. It gradually penetrated his mind that Morley, his friend, was taking an attitude which was somewhat less than friendly. A friend goes out on a limb. A friend defies calumniators. A friend—

"Say," Carlson said. "I just thought of a couple of things. Why didn't you tell me Violet was your neighbor?"

Morley blinked. "That's a non sequitur if I ever heard one. I didn't think about it. Why?"

"You knew we'd been married. It'd be the most natural thing in the world to tell me she lived next door to you, even if just in passing. I can't believe it just slipped your

mind."

"Well, it did," Morley said shortly. "Now, about—"

"Just a minute," Carlson said, raising a hand. "You and Violet were having an affair, weren't you?"

Morley chuckled. "Me, I'm a music lover."

"Because Violet told me your wife was jealous of her," Carlson frowned in concentration. "This is beginning to shape up. Whatever your views on music, you've got an eye for a pretty woman, and whatever else Violet was, she was beautiful. But she was greedy, too. So it would be in character for her to try to put the bee on you after you were compromised. You wouldn't sit still for that, because you don't like black-mail—"

Morley got up. "Oh, for God's sake, Fred! Next you'll be saying I killed her."

"Did you?"

Morley's face set. Anger glinted in his eyes. "I don't like that kind of talk."

"How did you know about the cat?"

Morley blinked again. "You do jump around in the damndest way. Hell, I lived next door. I've seen the cat."

"Sure, but I hadn't mentioned its being dead, and you said something about even if the cat was alive it couldn't testify."

Morley put hands on his hips and stared stonily down at Carlson.

"I guess you'd better get out of here, Fred. I'll have nothing more to do with you. The hell with you.

You can rot in jail or go to the chair, for all I give a good god-dam."

Carlson's eyes riveted themselves on the back of Morley's right hand. Four parallel scratches ran from wrist to knuckles.

"And there's the proof," Carlson said with conviction. He pointed to Morley's hand. "Where'd you get those scratches?"

Morley looked carelessly at the unhealed wound. He shrugged. "On a gang fishhook, I guess. Are you going to get out, or do I have to throw you out?"

"No gang fishhook ever made that scratch," Carlson said. "Fishhooks are set at a wide angle. You couldn't scratch yourself with more than two at once. That came from a cat, Violet's cat. You came in after I was out. Hell, you might even have put me on the couch and taken off part of my clothes. Then you went into the bedroom. When you reached for Violet in the dark, you startled the cat, asleep on the pillow beside her. It scratched you and jumped. You kicked it, then killed her and left. If these things are true, they can be proved."

"How, may I ask?" Morley showed a watchful amusement.

"Somebody up here would know if you drove out of here night before last, and when you got back. The garage man, maybe. You'd fill up with gas for a trip that long. And the cat will have been examined by laboratory men. If they found flesh under its claws, and it matches yours—hey, what are you doing?"

Morley turned while Carlson was speaking, took a shotgun from the corner behind him. He was calm, his eyes and hands were steady, and his voice, when he spoke, was faintly regretful.

"Too bad, chum," he said. "You're a trifle too smart for my comfort. I'm afraid I'm going to have an accident while I'm cleaning this gun."

Carlson stood up. "Put down that gun," he said.

Morley raised the weapon, pointed it, cocked it.

"Put down that gun!"

It was a whispered echo of Carlson's command, and it came from the closet behind Morley. The big man whirled to look into the barrel of a police service revolver, steady in the hand of Lt. Worts. After a long moment of popeyed surprise, Morley slowly put the shotgun on the floor.

"Thank you, Mr. Carlson," Worts said softly, "for your remarkable deductions. The fact that you weren't scratched was what worried me, for we did find flesh on the cat's claws." He took handcuffs from his pocket. "Well, Mr. Morley, shall we go?"

Zachary Scott will be remembered for a long time for his movie portrayal in the title role of MASK OF DIMITRIOS as the fleet, furtive, and fatal international hanger-on. He had a chance to show his varied talents to advantage as Carlson in MURDER OFF KEY. "I liked the role very much," he says. "SUSPENSE roles offer everything an actor likes. He can roar or whisper with equal effect, he doesn't have to memorize lines, and the sound man takes care of any running or fighting."
